

Voices of the Goddess: Women Clergy in East-West Perspective

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In this presentation, I share some of my initial research on the contemporary and historical landscapes of women clergy in goddess worshipping traditions with a focus on Pagan and Hindu faiths. The role and responsibilities of clergy within these traditions will be outlined based on fieldwork in India and material provided by seventeen priestesses of the developed world in order to create an opening to a conversation regarding the import and relevance of women clergy in these faiths to the politics of women's lives and religious experience.

After providing background information to help contextualize goddess-worshipping Hinduism, I then offer a case study highlighting the work of one Bengali Tantrika to facilitate the claim of a Tantrick female clergy. From here and as time constraints allow, I will share the perspectives of five of the seventeen Pagan priestesses from various traditions who provided me with information through interview, questionnaire, and survey feedback mechanisms.

With this work, I hope to expand the definition of clergy and provide instigation for: i) a discussion of how female religious leaders (as recognized both through formal and informal means) are serving the Divine Female/Goddess/Sacred Feminine; ii) their impact; and, iii) ramifications of their service and position for the broader collective. My inquiry focuses on the ways in which women clergy are pushing through patriarchal limitations in cultural, social, religious, and other arenas in order to facilitate communion, healing, empowerment, and transformation within their own spiritual communities... and beyond.

I. Introduction

Empowerment through Goddess, as I understand the process, means becoming re-sponsible in all ways. One enters into conversation with place, because that is who She is – within self, other and all-that-is.

–Glenys Livingstone, founder of PaGaian Cosmology

Women have long been the keepers of spiritual wisdom and insight, with numerous traditions around the globe providing examples of women's esteemed presence, practice, leadership, and mystical experience in communion with the Divine, however that may be defined. Still, in a world dominated by patriarchal faiths and institutions, women are often excluded from positions of spiritual leadership—even in traditions where goddess is honored. More specifically, the role of women is often confined to either that of supplicant in the house of god or to that of household worshiper, women being relegated in many faiths to supportive roles alone, with their powers and passions confined to the more private spheres of life.

Within contemporary Paganism and some forms of Hinduism, notably Śākta Tantra, however, a different story is clear: women are spiritual and community leaders within their traditions, commanding respect and honor for the carrying out of their sacred charge as defined within those communities and traditions. While ordination requirements, roles, and specific functions may vary, I argue based on preliminary findings that women clergy from the goddess-centered pathways of Paganism and Hinduism, regardless of personal and regional variances, offer us today both inspiration and an opportunity toward post-patriarchal renderings of power and authority in our spiritual communities and houses of worship. With this, women clergy too offer new possibilities as role models in not only the immediacy of their congregations and spiritual communities, but also in all the spaces they choose to inhabit as empowered female leaders.

My findings thus far indicate that women clergy within these faiths catalyze one or more of the following four opportunities for engagement into questions regarding the role of women in religion. They:

- i) potentiate insight into the possibilities for a feminist divine and a liberation spirituality in and beyond their own communities;
- ii) facilitate an opposition to oppressive religious dogma and cultural norms;
- iii) create spaces for women's and men's empowerment vis-à-vis a divine female; and
- iv) serve in ways that help shape women's and men's religious identities, in part through the modeling of alternative and often counter-cultural expressions of what it means to be female and feminine.

I. Women Clergy in Hindu Shakta Tantra

Background

The Śāktas, and particularly Śākta Tantricks, hold that Devī (Goddess) is both immanent and transcendent, but importantly, that her immanence in all things makes this world sacred—“ultimately, she is the world, and all its diverse forms are aspects of her Being.”¹ In this sense, She and her presence in creation are inescapable, and women are often regarded with great respect as they may, in some cases, be said to be a part of the devī's own śakti.

Yet, Śākta Tantra is still a tradition where many interpreters of it, both Indian and otherwise, avoid discussing the role and position of women. The topic is avoided for two reasons: first, because much of the tradition is kept secret, with practitioners themselves reluctant to share any aspects of the tradition to outsiders; and second, because in many interpretations, women within the tradition have not been seen to serve as anything other than ritual instruments for men's *sādhana* or spiritual practice. Thus, the challenge of understanding women's roles, let alone the roles of women clergy (despite the prominence of the divine female in the tradition), is apparent.

Nevertheless, recent attempts to discuss women's place in Śākta Tantra, particularly as women's roles and status within the larger context of India and Hinduism have changed, have, while not exhaustive or entirely feminist, at least begun; and they have opened a door to a critical

¹ Sherma, Rita DasGupta. (1998). “Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra,” in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*. Nelson, Lance E. ed. (SUNY: Albany), p. 107

conversation about the sacred, the profane, and the relevance of goddess-honoring faiths to Indian and other women; particularly those who have eschewed religion of any type because of its negative impact on women and women's status vis-à-vis moral and ethical dictates.

Today, it is increasingly the case (particularly among Western academics), to acknowledge that women have a significant role to play in the formal worship rites of Śākta Tantra. In some cases, that role is one of clergy—a priestess of the *kaula* (family or lineage)—in that women are functioning as teachers, leaders of worship rites and importantly, as initiators.² Some have suggested that in this way, Śākta Tantra may actually be a model for the elevation of women's status in Hindu society.³

In this regard, it is interesting to note that women priests are now being trained and recognized in the larger Hindu community in some parts of India (and elsewhere within the Hindu diaspora), although their training and role is to perform the orthodox rituals and rites with no particular emphasis on goddess.⁴

Case Study

To provide insight into what it means to be a woman priest within Śākta Tantra, I share from my experiences traveling with and learning from a Bengali woman priest, a Tantrika, Nyayaratnachitrika, over the course of visits with her between 2003 and 2007. Chitrika, as she is commonly known, was born in 1967 in Kolkata, West Bengal. The only daughter of esteemed Bengali Tantricks, she was taught philosophy, theology and practice from her parents at an early age, learning much of her ceremonial repertoire and receiving formal initiation from her mother. (In this tradition, it is believed that initiations from women are the most powerful; and to be a lineage holder within a family line even moreso.)

Also well educated in the academy, Chitrika holds a Master's degree in Sanskrit. She is an accomplished *gyotish*, or astrologer, and in addition to teaching duties at the University of Kolkata, Chitrika regularly sees clients in her astrology practice. She is a respected leader among Tantricks in both Assam (where I first met her during the annual goddess-centered festival of Ambubachi) and Kolkata and its environs. Called upon by the Śākta Tantrick community to lead ceremonies of all varieties, including long, demanding *homa* (fire) rituals, she celebrates her *ishtadevi*, personal goddess, Maa Tara, with both a private and a public face.

Much like many Western practitioners of goddess-spirituality, Chitrika has strong and clear boundaries about when she is 'out' about the full spectrum of her beliefs. For even in goddess-loving West Bengal, being a Tantrick means marginalization relative to other goddess-honoring beliefs and systems of worship. Tantra sits outside the normative, and those who practice Tantra are therefore often shunned and their beliefs denigrated, usually by misinformed and superstitious outsiders who equate Tantra with witchcraft or black magic.

² See, for example, Feuerstein, Georg. *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy* (Shambhala: Boston) 1998, especially pp. 102 and 136, or for the Tantras as a paradigmatic model for women's empowerment, see, for example, Rita DasGupta Sherma's essay "Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra," *ibid.*, especially p. 93

³ Sherma, Rita DasGupta, *ibid.*

⁴ For example, see "Her Holiness: overcoming the gender barrier to priesthood," in *India Together*. April 2002. Source: <http://www.indiatogether.org/women/worklife/priest.htm>.

In her own community, however, Chitrika is respected as someone who can be trusted to conduct the proper ceremonies at the proper times and locations. To my knowledge, she does not function as a guru in any traditional sense, but rather limits her service to performing the primary ceremonial duties of her tradition for those in need, acting much like an orthodox Hindu Purohit (lead priest). She is also the spiritual head of her family, with her husband following her lead on all spiritual matters. In other aspects of their relationship to which I have been privy, I have witnessed a respectfulness that transcends the spiritual and enters the mundane, with Kalyan, her husband, playing a supportive role to the many demands of Chitrika's life and the larger spiritual community she supports.

In traveling with her to Tarapith (located roughly 200 kilometers outside of Kolkata and the main pilgrimage center for goddess Tara, one of the great insights of Hindu Tantra), I was drawn even more deeply into Chitrika's world (this was facilitated in part through our friendship, and in part made possible by my own initiation in 1998 into Śākta Tantra). Her passion for and devotion to the goddess is profound and infectious; and she both inspires and leaves awe-struck the men and women who come to worship with her (I include myself in that group). She does this through her dedication, sincerity, humour, and knowledge, as well as through her ability to create a ritual space in which those gathered have a deeply moving experience. At her home *mandir* (temple), the effect is amplified as the space itself is a potent reminder of her lineage and the authority passed on to her, with myriad *murtis* (images) of the goddess gazing back at the devotee, some through eyes that have witnessed a century or more of worship.

By example and conviction, Chitrika's belief in the divine female, her training and role as a spiritual leader, and her offering of service to community, all support the claim of an empowered and empowering Tantrick female clergy. As other women in the tradition are willing to share their experiences and otherwise make themselves known, opportunities for deeper understandings will no doubt be revealed.

Similarly, in various Western incarnations of Śākta Tantra (for example, Sha'can, or even the merely Śākta-inspired Shakti Wicca), the Divine Female is a powerful part of a feminist reconceptualization of faith, worship, devotion, and spiritual leadership. This is typically because, as one feminist scholar argues, the Divine thus imagined and experienced may be telling us, "it's okay to be female,"⁵ and with that assurance (not found in the religio-cultural norms of most of the Western world), women are empowered, ready and willing to reconnect to their spiritual heritage; ready and willing to lead and serve.

More generally, I would say that honoring Goddess means telling humanity it's okay to restore honor and dignity to the Feminine—for both women and men. In this way, new models of religion and spirituality, and new role models of spiritual leadership, are emerging. Part of my own work as an initiated priestess of Kālī serving as clergy within a spiritual community, is to continue the reclamation of Her and the traditions she has in the past inspired, but without patriarchal biases. It is also to help evolve those traditions She does today inspire, with new names and forms of worship, giving women and men everywhere who are seeking to celebrate

⁵ Gross, Rita M. "Hindu Female Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLVI/3, September 1978, p. 286

the Divine as Goddess a safe space. This work, to me, is about facilitating transformation that moves us into respect for all that has been denied value within patriarchal paradigms—not the least of which is women in positions of spiritual power and authority.

II. Women Clergy in Goddess-centered Paganisms

Background

Much like Tantra, most Pagan traditions offer within their bounds goddess-centered the(a)ologies and philosophies that support a positive view of and relationship with not only the Divine but also actual women. Accordingly in these faiths, whether Pagan, Neo-Pagan, Heathen, Wiccan or otherwise named, it follows that women are acknowledged and respected spiritual leaders.

With this reality an integral component of Pagan practice and consciousness, my questioning of women on the various Pagan pathways focused on the nature and ramifications of the role(s) they play in spiritual community. My reading of their responses was also tuned to what others can learn from women who are carrying out the sacred charge of priestess, spiritual leader, or clergy today; especially when so much psycho-spiritual baggage is still to be found surrounding religion, and the realities at the intersection of religion, race, class and gender force us to acknowledge the infrequently-named luxury of alternative spiritualities.

To help answer these and related questions, I now invite five voices of the goddess to speak for themselves—and they do, for all have chosen to share their real names—on the subject of their spiritual leadership in community (each priestess' comments are excerpted from more lengthy responses to emailed questionnaires which have been condensed to fit our 20-minute time parameter on this panel):

Interview One – Karen Tate

Reverend Karen Tate, a “Goddess Advocate,” founder of The Isis Ancient Cultures Society, and recovering Catholic from the Bible Belt who in her words, “has rejected the dogma of patriarchal monotheism for the life-affirming and inclusive ideals of Goddess Spirituality,” shares:

Personally, I certainly believe my being female ordained clergy sets a new standard for women and men everywhere. It shows women can be spiritual leaders outside the home. I remember once when a friend, another female ordained minister, presided over funeral services at a major and busy cemetery, people looked at her as if she had two heads. They are not accustomed to seeing women clergy.

I believe my role as female clergy challenges the status quo of patriarchal clergy, particularly those who believe women should not be ordained. And I believe I elevate the status of women, and by association, Goddess, by being a female with the ideology I teach. My role in the world, along with other women like me, pushes the equality envelope further down the road. By example, we may also encourage other women to step up and demand equality or at least teach their children a better way for the future...Being in this role,

particularly publicly, shows everyone the possibility of what can - and should be
- women spiritual leaders equal to men.

When asked what it took and what it meant to be clergy, she responded:

There is no one set of rules or doctrine when it comes to this, but generally, clergy are those who have dedicated themselves to a path of service to Goddess and the community, which can manifest in many non-traditional, as well as traditional ways: from ritualist to hospice worker to author. There usually is a public ceremony where this path of commitment to service is publicly acknowledged and credentials are given within the organization sponsoring the clergy. Clergy are also those who have legal ministerial credentials recognized by the state and national government and IRS. Clergy are those who preside over ceremonies marking important life passages and teach the mysteries of Goddess to their congregation.

But more important than any government nod, is the person's sincere and serious commitment to being in service. This is not a position for those who think being a priest/ess or clergy is some romantic title or an interesting role to play at. It comes with responsibility, accountability and the requirement to serve others and Goddess. This is a path of service, not a path toward power, recognition or prestige.

Interview Two – Elena Kelly

Elena Kelly of The Circle of the Feminine Divine, a 501(c)3 organization based in Stockton, California with a 60/40 man-to-woman ratio, is a self-described Gnostic Christian Hindu Wiccan who has received formal initiations into each of the traditions she practices. As an organization, the Circle teaches the supreme divinity of the feminine; and in her role as clergy, Elena, “creates rituals, teaches, performs weddings and funerals, counsels, and serves on the Board of Directors.” She is the High Priestess of the community, and notes that there is no High Priest.

Elena shares that being a woman affects her role as clergy because it, “enables me to be a better listener, a kind and compassionate guide, and a nurturing presence in the lives of those to whom I minister.” She is “filled with her [goddess’] energy,” and relays that “that energy is what enables my work to exist.” Defining spiritual leadership as the, “removing [of] obstacles from the path so people can more easily find their own way to the divine,” she sees her, “life’s purpose as helping others find their own divinity.” She says:

One of our primary goals in the Circle is to teach everyone to be their own priest/ess, and conduct their own rituals and spiritual practices in such a way that honors the divine within them.

When asked if women worshipped outside the Circle, she exclaimed:

I certainly hope they are doing it at home, in the forest, on the mountain tops, and everywhere else!

She continued:

I think the statement [women's empowerment through goddess] makes is that women are deeply spiritual beings, capable of moving heaven and earth with a mere glance. The divine mother delights to reveal Herself in femininity, and women who are awake to that energy are creating a new paradigm in which submission is giving way to genuine equality. Our divine mother is revealed most clearly in all women. This path is very empowering to women, yet I have found many men who delight to learn and experience more of her each day. My passion is to bring women to the fore in all aspects of worship, [and] you're damn right it's political!

Interview Three – Katlyn Breene

Katlyn Breene, a priestess of Desert Moon Circle in Nevada, open to women and men, shares that the Circle is, “a private network that acts as a vessel for the expression of its members’ individual spiritual paths and connections with the Divine.” To her, being a woman clergy person means that she is a, “vessel for the Goddess.” More generally, clergy are, “[the] ones who do most of the work!”

Clergy within the Circle are the deciding force in the direction and organization of community activities; they are the providers of life’s rituals, worship services and sacraments. Clergy both counsel and support the community. As for her own role, Katlyn shares, “I try to support the circle in any way I can, I devote my home as sanctuary, provide rites of passage and ceremonial sacraments for the community, distribute funds to those in need, [and] call the council together to plan yearly activities.”

She believes that priestessing, “is a calling, it means to work very hard in service of the group. A priestess should strive to love unconditionally and expect no[thing] return. The work is its own reward. When Goddess smiles all are blessed.” In this vein, to Katlyn, “spiritual leadership is given to you by the community. It is what a priestess does, to be of service and counsel to the best of her abilities,” and she herself tries, “to inspire and guide women to all be priestesses at some time in their life.”

Interview Four – Judy Harrow

Judy Harrow is a 63-year-old, Third Degree Initiate in the Gardnerian tradition of Wicca who, since 1980, has been a coven leader serving the spiritual needs of both men and women. She notes, “I serve all members of the coven equally, without regard to their gender,” and while in her tradition, “the Deities are both female and male, the leadership is female.”

A native New Yorker, Judy holds a Masters degree in Counseling and chairs the Pastoral Care and Counseling Department of Cherry Hill Seminary, a Pagan seminary. To her, being clergy means that, “Most important, I am a coven leader. I also serve as elder and consultant to leaders of covens who trained in my coven and ‘hived off’ to form their own. I consider my work with Cherry Hill and my writing to be part of my clergy service.”

In her tradition,” the High Priestess (the female leader) is considered the primary leader and teacher within the coven, usually assisted by the High Priest,” and spiritual leadership means, “Teaching, empowering, mentoring, and guiding the spiritual development of those in my group,

and occasionally of others who ask for my help.” Regarding women’s empowerment through goddess, she shares,

In my observation, there is a confidence and assertiveness that develops in women who work with female images of the Sacred. So it does spill over into secular life. However, there is also social stigma, so many of us still endure the stress of the “broom closet,” which is disempowering. Also, I could not authentically facilitate the spiritual development of others if my own spirituality were not an active and growing process.

Finally, she notes, “I think it’s as important to help men reclaim their emotive selves as to help empower women.”

Interview Five – Ava

Finally, Ava, Founder and Director of The Goddess Temple of Orange County, clergy for “about eight years,” leads Sunday Services for women at the Temple and leads many forms of ritual, both public and private. She offers that her sacred charge is, “to lead group ritual and ceremony; to counsel when called upon; to handle the administration of the church and its business affairs; to appear publicly as needed for public blessings or speeches; and to hold spiritual truths as I understand them and make them clear to others as asked.” She offers her perspective on Goddess and Her impact:

Goddess values are shared power, working for the good of all, honoring Mother Earth and Her creatures, and using wisdom and love, rather than force...When male priests took over, they imbued religion with...patriarchal sickness and we’ve been in trouble spiritually and socially ever since. “Women’s work” has been devalued ever since we allowed men to take over the religious and spiritual functions and leave us with the jobs of creating the next generation of consumers, feeding them and cleaning up after everybody.

In this way, she says,

Everything personal eventually becomes political. Swapping patriarchy with goddess values certainly has social ramifications. When women remember their ancient natural spiritual authority, they will reclaim their spiritual power in the world, to the benefit of all. There are only two kinds of people on earth, mothers and their children. When mothers firmly and gently and lovingly teach their sons, teach men everywhere their proper place, which is to stand in reverence to Mother Earth, to Goddess, and to use their great powers to defend, support and protect all life, then the world will come into greater balance.

For Ava, “all women are priestesses at their own altars,” yet spiritual leadership is about, “being the best example publicly of your beliefs that you are capable of being; it means holding a safe space for others to speak and express themselves; it means leading “like water,” ... in other words, getting underneath people psychologically and supporting them, never leading from force.”

III. Conclusion

In summary, I offer for your ruminations the Tantrick saying: *yaireva patanam dravyahe siddhih taireva*, which roughly translates to: that by which one falls is also that by which one rises. I hope with this brief introduction to women as voices of the goddess in East and West to have illustrated some of the ways in which women clergy, those who are perhaps the most antinomian given normative religions and more conservative spiritual traditions, contain by virtue of their chosen path the very stuff of that rising. In them, through them and because of Her, Goddess, She to whom these priestesses and guardians of the sacred female pledge their allegiance and service, new potentials, new avenues of empowerment, and new explorations are possible. Through them, if I may be so bold, we may find that (r)evolution happens.